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AUTHOR	Youngs, Peter
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ABSTRACT

This study investigated connections between school district policy related to professional development in four urban districts nationwide and school organizational capacity in one elementary school in each district. The elementary schools served large numbers of low-income students, had histories of low achievement, had shown progress in student achievement in recent years related to their sustained professional development, participated in site-based management, and had received significant professional development assistance from one or more external agencies. Researchers made two to four visits to each school for up to 4 days at a time, observing professional development activities and classroom instruction, interviewing school and district staff and external providers of faculty development, and collecting pertinent documents (e.g., achievement data and demographic and fiscal information). Results indicated that school district policy could help schools enhance teachers' knowledge, skills, and dispositions; professional community; and program coherence. Results also showed that the way in which individual schools made use of supportive policies to strengthen capacity depended upon the strong leadership of principals and others. (Contains 28 references.) (SM)

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Connections Between District Policy Related to Professional Development and School Capacity in Urban Elementary Schools

Peter Youngs - University of Wisconsin, Madison
payoungs@students.wisc.edu

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P. Youngs

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School districts can influence teachers' instructional practices through policy related to professional development (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1996; Spillane & Thompson. 1997). In the 1980s, many districts in the United States took on a greater role in providing workshops and in-services for teachers. More funding was available for professional development due to federal categorical programs and state school reform efforts, and districts responded by creating staff development specialist positions, hiring external providers, and providing stipends and substitutes to increase teacher participation (Little, 1989). A decade later, though, many researchers criticized typical district offerings for being brief, focusing on generic pedagogy, placing teachers in a passive role, and failing to take account of their previous experiences or the contexts in which they worked (Corcoran, 1995; Little, 1993). In recent years, a growing number of districts have attempted to address these shortcomings by providing content specialists who work over time with teachers in their schools (Elmore & Burney, 1997; Massell & Goertz, 1999), supporting the creation of teacher inquiry groups (Stokes, 1999; King, 2000), and having schools assess their own needs and choose their own professional development activities (Jennings & Spillane, 1996; Bryk et al., 1998).

While many educators and policy makers believe that such innovative approaches to professional development are crucial in efforts to reform schools, few studies have documented how districts influence the nature of professional development. When researchers have examined this question, they have generally focused on large numbers of schools and districts (e.g., Little et al., 1987; Elmore & Burney; 1997; Massell & Goertz, 1999) with less explicit attention to the impact of policy on practices in individual schools. This paper examines connections between district policy related to professional development in four urban districts and school organizational capacity in one elementary school in each district. It is important to consider the relationship between district policy and school capacity because, as explained below, professional development is more likely to advance achievement of all students in a school if it addresses not only the learning and practices of individual teachers, but also other dimensions of capacity. After describing the policy context in each district and how district

policies addressed different aspects of capacity in four schools, the paper considers the implications of these findings for efforts by urban districts to help schools use professional development to improve capacity.

I. School Capacity and District Policy

This paper is part of a study of the potential of professional development to improve student achievement in traditionally low-achieving, high-poverty schools (Newmann, King, & Youngs, 2000). The conception of school capacity employed in the study is based on a synthesis of prior research on school reform and educational change (e.g., Corcoran & Goertz, 1995; Louis, Kruse, & Associates, 1995; Newmann, King, & Rigdon, 1997; O'Day, Goertz, & Floden, 1995; Talbert & McLaughlin, 1994). According to this conception, a school's capacity includes the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of individual teachers; the strength of the school's professional community; the extent to which its programs are coherent, focused, and sustained over time; the nature of the principal's leadership; and the quality of its technical resources (Newmann, King, & Youngs, 2000). My colleagues and I posit that professional development is most likely to improve student achievement when it comprehensively addresses all of these aspects of school capacity. This paper focuses primarily on the first three components, though, because school-based professional development is more likely to directly impact these aspects of capacity than the quality of technical resources or principal leadership.

The knowledge, skills, and dispositions of individual staff members comprise one aspect of school capacity. Teachers must be professionally competent in instruction and assessment centered on curriculum appropriate for their particular students, and they must hold high expectations for all students' learning. Individual teaching competence must be put to use, though, in an organized, collective enterprise, or what we refer to as a schoolwide professional community. A strong professional community is characterized by shared goals for student learning; meaningful collaboration among faculty; in-depth inquiry into assumptions, evidence,

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and alternative solutions to problems; and opportunities for teachers to exert influence over their work (King & Newmann, 2000). Teacher influence has two dimensions – the degree to which teachers are involved in making meaningful decisions about the operation of their schools (teacher empowerment) and the degree to which their schools have autonomy from their districts with regard to decisions about curriculum, assessment, and professional development (school autonomy).

A third component of school capacity is program coherence, which we define as the extent to which the school's programs for students and staff are coordinated, focused on clear learning goals, and sustained over a period of time. Program coherence can be considered an indicator of organizational integration. When schools pursue programs that are uncoordinated with each other, address only limited numbers of students or staff, and/or are terminated after a short period of time, organizational fragmentation weakens students and staff learning (Newmann, King, & Youngs, 2000). Focusing on these three aspects of school capacity provides a useful framework for critiquing both traditional and more innovative approaches to professional development. It suggests the need to examine not only whether professional development improves teachers' abilities, but also whether it leads to a strong professional community and program coherence.

Based on this conception, we contend that district policy can support or undermine a school's efforts to strengthen aspects of its organizational capacity. Recent case studies indicate that districts can enhance teachers' knowledge, skills, and dispositions; professional community; and program coherence in individual schools by adopting a centralized approach to curriculum, decentralizing control over budget and personnel, and providing opportunities for teachers to engage in ongoing professional development (Goldring & Hallinger, 1992; Hannaway, 1993). In New York City's District 2, for example, case study research indicates that shared commitment, collaboration, and program coherence in urban elementary schools can be increased by having them focus improvement efforts in one content area over a multi-year

period and providing opportunities for teachers to work with consultants on instructional issues (Elmore & Burney, 1997; Stein & D'Amico, 1998; Youngs, 1999).

- Other research demonstrates that decentralizing control over curriculum and professional development can also strengthen aspects of capacity (Bryk et al., 1998; Hannaway, 1993; Goldring & Hallinger, 1992; Jennings & Spillane, 1996; Newmann & Associates, 1996). In Chicago, for example, Bryk and colleagues (1998) found that decentralized control led to increases in teachers' knowledge, skills, and dispositions; professional community; and program coherence in many schools, particularly those characterized by strong democracy in which principals supported the involvement of teachers and parents in the decision-making process. Similarly, in a study of 24 actively restructuring schools, Newmann and colleagues reported that decentralized control contributed to high levels of authentic pedagogy and professional community (Louis, Marks, & Kruse, 1996; Newmann & Associates, 1996) in individual schools.[1]

While district policy can enhance aspects of school capacity, it can also weaken them, especially when it changes frequently or abruptly or when district policies are not internally consistent (Goldring & Hallinger, 1992; Spillane, 1998). For example, a district that establishes a systemwide reading program and then changes it every few years is likely to have a deleterious effect on schools' efforts to build capacity. Capacity may also be diminished when a district implements high-stakes math assessments that are not consistent with its math curriculum. In addition, a district's use of consultants may have little positive impact on capacity if their training is unrelated to schools' missions and instructional goals.

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[1] While these studies all examined the influence of professional development activities on individual dimensions of school capacity, none of them looked at the influence of such activities on all dimensions of capacity – teachers'

II. Methodology

Sample

Nine public elementary schools were initially selected through a national search for schools serving large proportions of low-income students which a) had histories of low achievement, b) had shown progress in student achievement over the last three to five years, c) attributed their progress to schoolwide and sustained professional development, d) participated in site-based management, and 3) had received significant professional development assistance from one or more external agencies. Approximately 80 nominations were received, and information was gathered through school questionnaires and phone interviews with principals and other key participants in the schools' development.

In addition to the five criteria, the schools were chosen to represent different approaches to professional development and different kinds of assistance from district, state, and independent providers. For example, the emphasis in some schools was on implementing programs of curriculum, instruction, and assessment that had previously been developed by external agencies. Examples include the Success For All program in reading and mathematics and adoption of curriculum to meet state-specific assessment outcomes. In contrast, professional development in other schools aimed more toward unique forms of school development.

The schools were located in medium-sized and large urban districts throughout the U.S. They included grades pre-K or K to grades 4 or 5, and enrolled from about 500 to 800 students. Demographic characteristics of staff and students varied, but the schools reflected many urban schools in the U.S. with large percentages of African American, Asian, and Latino students and large percentages of students from low-income families. Annual student mobility averaged 31%. All of the schools reported that in the early 1990s more than 50 percent of their students scored below national grade level norms or minimum testing standards issued by their states or

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knowledge, skills, and dispositions, professional community, program coherence, principal leadership, and technical

districts for reading and/or mathematics. In six schools, at least 80 percent of the students scored below such indicators in at least one of the two subjects.

Data Collection

Data collection from fall of 1997 through spring of 1999 involved two to four visits to each school for up to four days at a time.[2] Researchers observed professional development activities and classroom instruction, interviewed school and district staff as well as external providers of professional development, and collected pertinent documents including achievement data and demographic and fiscal information. Research staff compiled field notes from each observation and taped interview conducted during site visits.

For each visit to a school, a school report based on field notes was written addressing the research questions of the study. That is, interviews and observations were summarized to describe how professional development addressed the different aspects of capacity, and how district and state policy influenced professional development and school capacity. Research staff reviewed each report to determine whether it adequately addressed the research questions and offered sufficient support for claims. The revised reports served as the database for individual and cross-case analyses.

District and state officials were asked about policies related to professional development, student assessment, and school improvement and accountability, as well as other unique initiatives. To insure that our understandings of these policies were accurate and up-to-date as of spring 1999, we prepared brief synopses of our findings and shared them with district and state staff for comments.

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resources.

[2] After initial visits to all nine schools in 1997, we chose seven schools for follow-up that planned to sustain professional development aimed at key aspects of capacity and that represented different district and state policy contexts. Four of these schools with the greatest potential for strong professional development were visited three more times through 1999 and the other three schools were visited one more time in 1999.

Analysis

We conducted two stages of analysis to determine the level of school capacity at each school, as well as the extent to which professional development addressed capacity over the course of the study. The first stage of analysis occurred after each school visit when research staff compiled field notes from their observations and interviews and wrote a report addressing the research questions of the study. At this stage of analysis, research staff were concerned with documenting professional development activities that addressed the elements of school capacity.

The second stage of analysis took place after the school visits had been completed and all of the school reports were written. We used the reports to code each school on several variables including the level of school capacity at the time of the first visit and the final visit, and the extent to which each aspect of capacity was addressed by professional development over the course of our study. Research staff assigned individual ratings for each category; when there was disagreement, the ratings were discussed until consensus was reached. The level of agreement on the capacity measures among the three members of the research team prior to discussion was 63 per cent.

III. District Policy Related to Professional Development

This section examines district policy related to professional development, school improvement, and student assessment in four urban districts: Jackson, Salomon, Newton, and Drummond. Of the seven follow-up districts in our study, these four were featured in this paper because they collectively provide evidence that districts can support, interfere with, and have neutral effects on individual schools' efforts to use professional development to build school capacity. (Two of the other districts, Crescent and Brentwood, are briefly discussed in the final section.) Of the four, Jackson took the most centralized approach to professional

development and school improvement while the other districts provided schools with more autonomy in these areas.

District policy in Jackson

Kintyre Elementary School was located in Jackson, a medium-sized urban district in Kentucky, which had schools focus improvement efforts in one content area over a multi-year period through the use of consolidated plan requirements and district resource teachers.[3] Each school in the district was required to submit a consolidated plan every two years. Schools were expected to use data from the Commonwealth Accountability Testing System (CATS), the state's assessment system, to establish priority goals in reading, writing, or math; and to identify instructional approaches, professional development activities, and other strategies to meet their goals. There were 40 district resource teachers in the district who each worked with three or four schools on a weekly basis. These resource teachers were responsible for facilitating the development of the consolidated plan; helping schools use CATS data to identify needs; helping teachers implement reforms in curriculum, instruction, and assessment; and brokering services or providing professional development themselves.

Due to concerns about student performance in reading on the state assessments, Kintyre elected to focus on this subject in its consolidated plans during our study (1997-99). In 1998-99, the school implemented the Literacy Hour which involved classroom teachers providing 60 minutes of classroom instruction to groups of students each morning. In addition, teachers from Kintyre participated in several district-sponsored professional development activities that were consistent with this approach. These activities included the Early Literacy Collaborative (ELC), training in the Marie Clay Observation Survey (MCOS), and a summer literacy institute. The ELC provided opportunities for teachers in grades K-3 to work one-on-one with a Reading Recovery (RR) teacher for a year. Jackson offered training to K-1 teachers in the MCOS, a

[3] Jackson's approach to school improvement is similar in some ways to that taken by New York City's District 2 (Elmore & Burney, 1997; Stein & D'Amico, 1998).

comprehensive survey of children's reading strategies that was consistent with RR. In 1998, the district's summer reading institute focused on guided reading, shared reading, and other instructional strategies.

All new and experienced teachers in Jackson were required to complete 24 hours of professional development each year, 18 of which were up to the discretion of the teacher and six of which were controlled by the school or district. At the beginning of our study (fall 1997), two district policies imposed constraints on professional development for teachers. First, the schools' ability to spend money for substitutes to release staff for professional development was severely limited by the superintendent, with virtually no substitutes permitted on Mondays and Fridays - important days for attending out-of-town conferences. Second, the district refused to compensate teachers for the time they spent earning their 24 credits. By spring 1999, though, the district had relaxed it's policy regarding substitutes and in 1999-2000, it created four additional professional development days for elementary schools by lengthening the school day by 30 minutes. Further, throughout our study, the teachers' contract in Jackson required teachers to attend four hours worth of meetings after school each month.

In 1998, Jackson issued detailed performance standards in reading and other subjects and began piloting the diagnostic tests for 2nd- through 5th-graders that measured basic reading and math skills. In May of that year, all certified and classified staff across the district attended two days of professional development in which they were introduced to the standards and tests. Teachers in grades 2-5 were expected to incorporate the standards into their practices by selecting or devising lesson plans, instructional strategies, and assessments based on the standards. The purpose of the diagnostic tests was to identify students' strengths and weaknesses in reading and math prior to fourth grade when they started taking the state assessments. Teachers were to develop "Individual Success Plans" for those students who performed poorly on the tests, failing to meet a minimum level of performance established by the district for particular skills.

District Policy in Salomon

Renfrew Elementary School was located in Salomon, a medium-sized, urban district in California. At the beginning of our study, Salomon permitted schools to make most decisions about curriculum and professional development, but in contrast to Jackson, it employed fewer strategies designed to provide instructional guidance and promote school-level coherence. Salomon had all K-5 teachers in the district participate in professional development on strategies for reading and writing, and it funded released time for teachers in all schools to participate in inquiry groups. Nonetheless, district administrators remained concerned that some schools were not using their control over curriculum and professional development to significantly improve instruction. Consequently, they proposed new mathematics and language arts curricula, implemented some common professional development requirements across schools, and, in response to state legislation, began developing districtwide standards and assessments in language arts and math.

Salomon provided strong financial support for teachers to participate in inquiry groups in several schools in 1994-95 and 1995-96, and the district used funds from an Annenberg grant to continue supporting them during the years of our study (1997-98 through 1999-2000). The funds were used to pay for external coaches and substitutes. Inquiry groups at Renfrew met every two weeks for three hours. According to one coach, the purpose of inquiry was for teachers to examine *their own beliefs and practices regarding education, student performance, instruction, assessment,* and explore whether their beliefs and practices are helping *all students achieve at high levels.* Salomon also required all elementary school teachers to participate in professional development activities related to literacy instruction. These activities occurred during four-day summer institutes and one-day sessions during the school year, and included workshops on teaching literacy in small classes, strategies for teaching spelling, and scoring writing assessments.

During our study (spring 1997 through spring 1999), Salomon offered eight days of professional development in which teachers were paid for participating. Prior to 1998-99, all of

these days were controlled by the schools. Renfrew usually used four or five days for schoolwide institutes in which teachers analyzed student progress in relation to school-developed outcomes and considered the implication of this data for their instructional practices. In 1998-99, the district implemented Math Renaissance (MR), a curriculum and professional development initiative, in several schools including Renfrew. MR was designed to help teachers acquire mathematical knowledge and develop strategies for engaging students in critical thinking and problem solving. The district also adopted the Scholastic language arts program, one of three literacy programs approved by the state. Scholastic was a comprehensive program for teaching reading and writing in grades K-6 that featured a significant amount of phonics materials due to the state emphasis on phonics.

Due to a state requirement, Salomon started developing districtwide standards in literacy and math in 1998-99. The district administrator responsible for directing this effort, Renfrew's former principal, worked with groups of teachers to develop literacy and math exit standards for grades 5, 8, and 11, as well as assessment tasks based on the standards. Two or three teachers from each school in the district were directly involved in this work. These teachers shared drafts of the standards with colleagues in their schools to get feedback from them. The language arts and math assessments were administered for the first time in spring 1999. The language arts assessment involved an extended writing activity and the one in math involved problem solving. Along with the creation of new standards and assessments, Salomon also began requiring all elementary schools in 1998-99 to participate in common professional development activities. For example, during Renfrew's mid-year institute, teachers were required to attend a half-day session on math assessments. In addition, a new state law lowered the number of professional development days during the school year to three beginning in 1999-2000, which meant that the school would have to shorten or eliminate its mid-year institutes.

District Policy in Newton

Located in Newton, a medium-sized urban district in Texas, Lewis Elementary School implemented Success For All (SFA) reading, math, and World Lab in the mid- and late-1990s. While Newton provided few trainings that were directly related to SFA, the district did have several policies in place related to professional development and school improvement. These included released time for teachers to attend conferences, school data reviews, and a system for recording teachers' professional development activities. The district provided schools with four full days for professional development and two substitute days per school employee to enable teachers to attend conferences and workshops. Lewis often used two of the four professional development days during the summer to provide initial training in SFA reading, math, or World Lab. The other two days were typically used for teachers to choose in-service activities provided by the district. Lewis used the substitute days to send teachers to SFA conferences which introduced them to new instructional strategies and helped to build or maintain their commitment to SFA.

Newton implemented the state-recommended Professional Development and Appraisal System (PDAS) which included a teacher self-report form and an administrator observation form. Each year, teachers were required to complete the self-report form which involved describing their professional development activities over the previous 12 months, indicating how these activities had influenced their classroom practices, and making plans for future professional development. In addition, the district required each school to create a five-year strategic plan and update it on an annual basis. In developing their plans, schools were expected to analyze student achievement data, establish instructional goals, and identify professional development activities to help them meet the goals. While the use of PDAS and strategic plans in Newton provided less instructional guidance than Jackson's consolidated plan requirements, it is also worth noting that these policies did not interfere with Lewis' efforts to implement SFA.

Another important aspect of the policy context facing schools in Newton was the state accountability system. This system placed schools into one of four categories based on their attendance and dropout rates and their performance on the Texas Assessments of Academic Skills (TAAS). The four categories were exemplary, recognized, acceptable, or low-performing. After three consecutive years of low performance, schools were subject to visits and monitoring by state education agency officials. To help teachers prepare their students for TAAS, Newton offered professional development activities related to writing and math instruction which emphasized the TAAS assessments in those areas.

District Policy in Drummond

Pitlochry Elementary School was located in Drummond, a large urban district in Florida. The school implemented SFA reading in 1993-94 and SFA math in 1996-97. In 1996, the state created a list of low-performing schools in which less than 50 percent of the students were performing at grade level on standardized tests. There were 38 schools from Drummond on this list and the district required these schools to implement SFA reading in 1996-97. The district offered two days of professional development related to SFA reading in summer 1996 as well as many workshops and trainings related to SFA reading over the course of our study (spring 1997 to spring 1999). Drummond also organized a network for SFA reading facilitators, each of whom was working at one school in the district. The facilitators met monthly in small groups to discuss issues and problems related to implementing SFA reading.

These district activities supported Pitlochry's efforts to implement SFA. In addition, Drummond provided schools with several professional development days and autonomy to determine how to use them. Teachers in the district were contracted for 11 student-free workdays. Early release (one hour) was scheduled for all elementary schools once a week. For the most part, the content of the workdays and early release days was determined by individual schools. Pitlochry used many of these days for professional development related to SFA including team meetings with facilitators and implementation checks. During

implementation checks, SFA trainers visited the school to observe instruction, meet with the reading facilitator, examine records of student performance, and provide feedback to school staff.

The district changed course in 1998-99 and stopped requiring low-performing schools to implement SFA. While it continued to offer professional development related to SFA reading and to sponsor a network for SFA facilitators, Drummond also implemented some new policies related to curriculum, assessment, and professional development. With regard to curriculum, it mandated that all elementary schools select and implement a comprehensive approach to literacy instruction. Schools were allowed to choose SFA reading or the Scholastic language arts program. The district also used funds from an Annenberg grant to implement a health initiative. As part of the initiative, university faculty visited schools to help teachers integrate health-related topics into the curriculum. In addition, Drummond began requiring elementary schools to administer the Standardized Reading Inventory, an assessment of basic literacy skills. Finally, it mandated that elementary school teachers participate in professional development related to math instruction.

IV. Findings

This section looks across all four districts to identify policies and professional development activities that addressed various aspects of school capacity. Data from Jackson, Salomon, Newton, and Drummond indicate that district policy can help schools enhance teachers' knowledge, skills, and dispositions; professional community; and program coherence. At the same time, the study found that how individual schools interact with their district policy context influences whether and the extent to which district policy supports capacity.

District Policy That Addressed Teachers' Knowledge, Skills, and Dispositions

Three of the districts provided opportunities for schools to strengthen teachers' knowledge, skills, and dispositions. At Kintyre, for example, teachers participated in several district-sponsored professional development activities that supported the school's efforts to implement the Literacy Hour. These district activities included the Early Literacy Collaborative (ELC), training in the Marie Clay Observation Survey (MCOS), and a summer literacy institute. Through the ELC, six primary teachers each worked one-on-one with a Reading Recovery teacher for a year; the RR teachers worked with groups of students, observed the teachers' practices, modeled different instructional strategies, and planned collaboratively with the teachers. Speaking of an RR teacher, one teacher commented, *I watched her model, then she involved me more and more with guided reading and shared reading.* By working daily in teachers' classrooms, the RR teachers were able to help them adapt new pedagogical techniques to their classroom contexts and reflect with them on their experiences.

The 1998 summer literacy institute also introduced teachers to new instructional strategies in literacy including ones for teaching about synonyms and story sequencing and helping students think of writing topics and determine the meaning of words. After the institute, Kintyre's school-based resource teacher and RR teachers provided sessions for the entire staff on these and other strategies. As one RR teacher commented, *the reading institute this summer was excellent. We've shared with the teachers ways to incorporate literacy more into their classrooms, including the use of guided reading and shared reading.* In addition, the school resource teacher and RR teachers provided regular feedback to teachers in 1998-99 as they tried to implement changes in their approaches to teaching literacy. Another district initiative involved training K-1 teachers to use the MCOS, a comprehensive survey of children's reading strategies. The MCOS assessed how many letters children could recognize, whether they understood the concept of print words, whether they knew the difference between letters and words, and whether they understood how books work. According to one of the RR teachers at Kintyre, *when you finish this as a teacher, you know everything the child knows about reading and writing.*

At Renfrew, district support for inquiry helped strengthen teachers' expectations for African-American students. One teacher stated, *We've talked a lot about issues surrounding inequality and racism … so when I do go back to the classroom, I'm always thinking about my kids of color and how I treat them and how other people treat them and constantly thinking about what I could be doing.* In addition, Salomon's requirement that teachers participate in professional development related to literacy instruction was consistent with Renfrew's focus on Reading Recovery. During the mid-1990s, the school modified its previous emphasis on whole language to target more specific outcomes in reading and writing and to ground instruction and assessment more directly in specific skills and levels of student proficiency. Two RR teachers at the school trained the entire staff in RR, and several teachers participated in professional development in guided reading and guided writing from the Wright Group. These school-initiated activities were complemented by district workshops on teaching literacy in small classes, strategies for teaching spelling, and scoring writing assessments.

State policy also helped enhance teacher's knowledge and skills at Renfrew. In the early-1990s, the school applied for and received a restructuring grant through California's SB 1274 program. The grant provided approximately $100,000 a year for five years, including $35,000 - $45,000 each year for professional development. Grant funds were used to support the creation of grade-level outcomes and assessments at Renfrew. One teacher stated, *The assessment work changed the climate so that we are outcome-based, especially grading together which we had never done before.* Another added, *We've taken writing samples and read them together and scored them. With our rubrics, common data collection, and scoring, we can use these as tools for planning our future instruction.*

In Drummond, the district provided numerous workshops related to SFA reading. One teacher at Pitlochry noted that she learned how to implement the program at a district-sponsored training and *what I learned there I use every single day.* Other district activities addressed specific components of the program such as reading comprehension, fostering higher-order thinking through meaningful sentences, and identifying skills in SFA lessons that

correspond with the district's standardized tests. Drummond also provided workshops and week-long summer trainings related to its health initiative. These activities led many teachers at the school to begin emphasizing health issues, personal hygiene, and safety with their instructional practices. As part of the initiative, university faculty visited teachers' classrooms, demonstrated lessons, and talked with teachers about the health curriculum.

In contrast to the other districts, Newton provided few professional development activities that strengthened teachers' knowledge, skills, and dispositions at Lewis. At the same time, district policies regarding control of professional development and substitutes strongly supported the school's efforts to use SFA activities and conferences to enhance this aspect of capacity. Because Drummond granted schools and teachers full control over the content of the four professional development days, Lewis was able to use these days, when necessary, for initial SFA training and implementation checks. Further, having two substitute days per school employee enabled the school to send many of its teachers to SFA conferences each year. At the 1999 national SFA conference, teachers from Lewis acquired strategies for teaching writing and working with slow learners, as well as ideas for student book projects.

District Policy That Addressed Professional Community

In Jackson and Salomon, district policy addressed several aspects of professional community including shared commitment to clear learning goals, collaboration, and (in Renfrew's case) reflective inquiry. The policy context in Newton supported shared commitment at Lewis to some extent, but generally had a neutral effect on professional community at the school. In contrast, the district policy in Drummond did not address school-level collaboration or reflective inquiry and appeared to threaten shared commitment at Pitlochry. As illustrated below, though, the extent to which district policy in these districts actually supported or diminished professional community in the four schools depended largely on how the schools interacted with their policy contexts.

Professional community at Kintyre. In examining the ways in which district policy in Jackson addressed professional community at Kintyre, it is useful to consider the school's recent history. In the early-1990s, Kintyre became a magnet school and implemented Montessori schoolwide. Within a few years, student performance on state assessments had improved in most subjects, but not in reading. According to the district resource teacher assigned to the school, Ms. Carter, literacy was probably the weakest part of the Montessori curriculum. *Not weak because Maria Montessori designed it weak, but weak because her native language (Italian) was very phonetic while our language is more complicated.* Due to concerns with student performance in reading, the school elected to focus on reading in its consolidated plans. As a result of this focus on reading and the work of Ms. Carter, Kintyre was able to build a strong shared commitment to both literacy and Montessori. In addition, several district-sponsored activities including the ELC, the MCOS training, and the summer literacy institute enhanced collaboration. While a few teachers at the school expressed concern that implementation of the Literacy Hour would make it difficult to comprehensively cover the Montessori curriculum, most staff felt that this literature-based approach was an important supplement to Montessori.

The high levels of shared commitment and collaboration at Kintyre were threatened in 1998 when the school's second-year principal, Ms. Duncan, strongly supported the district standards and diagnostic tests, and called for teachers to incorporate the standards into their lesson plans. As the school-based resource teacher reported to teachers, Duncan *wants evidence of skills taught, strategies used, and the assessments you used to measure them. The Jackson performance standards should be used to guide the identification of skills, strategies, and assessments.* Duncan also directed teachers to use the results of the diagnostic tests to develop individualized learning plans for students who performed poorly on the tests. She gave priority to the district standards over Montessori because of concerns over the effectiveness of the Montessori program with low-income children. During a teacher workday, she told several teachers, *I don't care if you have the Montessori label or the more traditional label, mix them up, do whatever it takes to get to where we need to go.*

The principal's support for these initiatives lowered the morale of many experienced Montessori teachers at the school. Some of them expressed concern in fall 1998 that the implementation of performance standards and diagnostic tests, along with the literacy hour, would weaken the integrity of the school's Montessori program. In a grade team meeting, one stated that *It seems like the Montessori teaching isn't important . . . If we keep adding things to our curriculum, what's going to happen to the Montessori?* As the school year went on, the teachers focused less on Montessori and morale remained low among many of them. The district resource teacher, aware that Duncan was not trained in Montessori, felt that the strong shared commitment at Kintyre would be lost if the principal did not make Montessori a priority. In Carter's words, *She needed to have a vision for the school. If Montessori was going to happen she had to have a reason to make it go. I felt there were only a couple of classrooms in the building that I thought were good enough examples.*

To address these concerns, Carter arranged in spring 1999 for Duncan and a group of Kintyre teachers to visit several urban public Montessori schools and attend a national Montessori conference in a nearby state. These experiences convinced the principal that Montessori, properly implemented, could help minority, low-income students achieve at high levels and led to changes in her instructional leadership. In contrast to her apparent indifference towards Montessori in fall 1998, she stated a year later that the school should *implement Montessori the way it was meant to be implemented. If they truly taught Montessori the way it was meant to be taught … we wouldn't have to worry about test scores because Montessori goes above and beyond any standard the state or district has in place.* Carter added that Duncan returned from the school visits and conference with a clear vision for the school. *I felt that was a real turning point. The very next staff meeting she was so pumped up; encouraged the teachers who had been doing Montessori to keep it up and to show the rest of us the way. That's where the energy began that lead to more Montessori training.* The principal's leadership not only led to a renewed schoolwide commitment to Montessori, but also, as discussed below, helped Kintyre maintain a fairly high level of program coherence.

Professional community at Renfrew. Both district and state policy helped Renfrew maintain high levels of professional community. Each August prior to the beginning of the school year, the entire faculty met to develop two new essential questions (or reaffirm their commitment to existing ones) related to teachers' practices. The 1274 state restructuring grant enhanced shared commitment and teacher influence by providing mechanisms (i.e., the protocol process and schoolwide institutes) for using these essential questions to analyze teachers' instructional practices. During our study, for example, one question asked what teachers were doing to address inequities in achievement among students from different racial groups. At the annual mid-year institutes, the faculty addressed these questions by having grade teams make presentations and receive feedback about their instructional practices and the performance of their students.

Salomon's support for inquiry groups strengthened collaboration and reflective inquiry among teachers at Renfrew. One teacher described her inquiry group as *a place where I feel safe enough to share what happened in my classroom and get honest feedback from colleagues about how I handled the situation, and ideas about what might be the next steps.* Another teacher added, *Inquiry has given me the opportunity to think about my own practice* and led him to focus with other colleagues on specific aspects of their classrooms. The district policy context also strengthened teacher empowerment at Renfrew during most of our study by providing the school with autonomy with regard to professional development. In particular, several teachers reported in interviews that they determined the focus of the essential questions and the content of their professional development.

While Salomon's support for inquiry and decentralized approach to professional development helped Renfrew strengthen professional community, some district policies threatened to weaken this aspect of capacity at the school. For example, Math Renaissance was reputed to provide ongoing opportunities for teachers to work with a facilitator as they acquired new mathematical knowledge, learned to use new instructional materials, and developed strategies for engaging students in critical thinking and problem solving. While MR

supported Renfrew's efforts to promote algebraic thinking and problem-solving skills among students, the MR facilitator assigned to the school employed a top-down approach which threatened shared commitment and teacher influence. In response, the faculty at the school elected to stop working with the program. The school's principal, Ms. Benton,[4] supported this decision and helped faculty to pursue changes in math instruction instead through cross-grade math teams.

Professional community at Pitlochry and Lewis. Drummond initially helped Pitlochry maintain shared commitment to SFA reading through professional development for teachers and SFA reading facilitators, but these activities did not address other aspects of professional community. The district trainings provided opportunities for Pitlochry teachers to collaborate with other teachers in Drummond to acquire and refine knowledge and skills related to SFA. At the same time, these activities did not nurture collaboration or reflective inquiry **at Pitlochry** since they were not organized around teacher teams and since teachers had few opportunities to share what they learned in district workshops with their colleagues at the school. Although grade-level teams had 30 minutes of common planning time each week, there was no expectation that they meet as a team to plan instruction or reflect on their practice. As a result, few of the teams engaged in collaboration or reflective inquiry on a regular basis.

Pitlochry's shared commitment to SFA reading remained high for the duration of our study (spring 1997 to spring 1999), but some district initiatives threatened to weaken the school's focus on a common mission. In 1998-99, Drummond implemented the Standardized Reading Inventory (SRI) and required schools to adopt a comprehensive reading program. While Pitlochry and other schools were allowed to continue using SFA, many staff felt that the SRI was not consistent with the program. One first-grade teacher, for example, asserted that the SRI was inappropriate because it did not match the SFA reading program and because her students were not developmentally ready for a 40-question test with difficult vocabulary. The district also sent conflicting policy signals to Pitlochry and other schools with regard to SFA

[4] Ms. Benton replaced the school's longtime principal, Ms. Diamond, midway through our study.

math. Although schools were permitted to adopt this program, Drummond began requiring teachers to participate in math workshops that were unrelated to SFA and ended SFA math implementation checks.

Overall, the policy context in Newton appeared to have a neutral effect on professional community at Lewis. During professional development days and substitute days, teachers participated in SFA trainings and conferences which helped maintain shared commitment. The principal, Mr. Aldridge, commented on the effect of the conferences: *It helps for them to hear what is going on in other schools; especially if they have taught only in this school, they get a deeper appreciation and understanding of what we're about.* On the other hand, the district's strategic plans and use of PDAS did not strongly address professional community. Instead of using district programs to address this aspect of capacity, the school maintained high levels of collaboration and empowerment through grade-level team meetings, regular meetings with school-based SFA facilitators, and implementation checks with SFA staff. In contrast to Pitlochry, strong principal leadership at Lewis and a neutral district policy context enabled the school to use professional development to enhance all aspects of professional community as well as program coherence (discussed below).

At the state level, the assessment and accountability system in Texas posed a threat to Lewis' shared commitment to SFA reading and math. Some teachers expressed opposition to the assessments because they forced them to modify their practices. One teacher stated, *The accountability is positive, but the results on teaching are negative . . . because I'm forced to teach to the test.* Another staff member added that teachers *could have more opportunities for some really great teaching if* (we) *didn't have to completely focus on TAAS.* To address teachers' concerns about the accountability system, Lewis decided to allocate 30 minutes of instruction each day to literacy and math skills associated with the assessments. This enabled teachers to ensure their students were prepared for TAAS while preserving their commitment to SFA.

District Policy That Addressed Program Coherence

Policy in three of the districts addressed internal school coherence. The policy context in Jackson provided the strongest support for program coherence through its consolidated plans and district resource teachers while Salomon and Drummond employed fewer measures designed to promote coherence. Again, as with professional community, the extent to which school-level coherence was supported by district policy was strongly influenced by the schools themselves.

In Jackson, the consolidated plan requirements and district resource teacher helped staff at Kintyre focus professional development on literacy throughout our study (fall 1997 through fall 1999). The implementation of district standards and assessments posed a challenge to program coherence, though, because they were not fully consistent with Montessori and therefore threatened to weaken the integrity of the school's Montessori program. In response, the district resource teacher took steps to restore Kintyre's commitment to Montessori. These steps included arranging the Montessori school visits and conference in spring 1999 and were followed by other Montessori-related activities including a two-day retreat for the entire staff and training for assistants. In addition, two classroom teachers began the Montessori pre-primary training at a nearby university in summer 1999. In fall 1999, one teacher commented *There is a strong focus on Montessori. I feel there is more support for Montessori this year than last.* Another added, *we're putting a re-emphasis on Montessori and making the Montessori match up with curriculum standards.* In sum, the interaction of district policy and school-level leadership, on the part of the principal and the district resource teacher, helped Kintyre maintain a fairly high level of program coherence through the end of our study.

Salomon's support for inquiry groups enhanced internal school coherence at Renfrew by complementing the faculty's work in schoolwide institutes. The school's longtime principal, Ms. Diamond, noted that the inquiry groups and use of essential questions were mutually reinforcing. *When teachers are in inquiry groups, they talk very much about some of the things we're talking about* with the essential questions. *But it's private, there are norms of confidentiality,*

privacy, reflection . . . having those two strategies, they are very complimentary and they really, really help. Other district policies in Salomon that addressed program coherence were the adoption of the Scholastic language arts program and the development of districtwide standards and assessments. The district standards and assessments seemed consistent with Renfrew's self-developed outcomes and this may have been due to the fact that teachers from the school served on key district standards and assessment committees. By the end of our study (spring 1999), though, these initiatives were still relatively new, thus making it difficult to ascertain their effect on coherence at Renfrew.

Drummond supported program coherence by requiring all elementary schools to adopt a comprehensive approach to literacy instruction. Although the implementation of the SRI threatened to weaken coherence at schools that used SFA reading, this policy did not affect Pitlochry's focus on SFA reading. Conflicting policy signals may have weakened the school's focus on SFA math, though. Pitlochry's SFA math facilitator criticized the district for requiring teachers to attend workshops in math that were unrelated to SFA math, stating that teachers learned things that they couldn't implement in their classrooms. *If teachers are going to go to workshops related to math, they should be* SFA math workshops. The district's efforts to implement a health curriculum also posed a threat to coherence at Pitlochry, but this initiative was still in its early stages at the time of our final visit to the school (spring 1999).

Newton had fewer policies than the other districts that directly addressed internal school coherence. It required schools to develop strategic plans, but unlike Jackson, Newton did not have schools focus improvement efforts on one content area over a multi-year period. It offered professional development in literacy and math but did not go as far at Drummond to require schools to adopt a comprehensive approach to teaching literacy or require all teachers to participate in professional development related to literacy (as Salomon did). In effect, the policy context in Newton appeared to be neutral with regard to program coherence. Consequently, Lewis was able to use professional development related to SFA to maintain a high level of coherence throughout our study.

V. Summary and Implications

These findings have important implications for professional development policies and practices in urban school districts. One implication is that districts can help teachers increase their knowledge, skills, and dispositions, but such efforts may not enhance instructional quality and student achievement if they don't also address schoolwide professional community at the same time. At Kintyre, teachers collaborated with colleagues from their school as they acquired and refined knowledge and instructional strategies in literacy and Montessori. Similarly, teachers at Renfrew worked with colleagues from their school in grade teams, inquiry groups, and schoolwide institutes as they reflected on their individual and collective efforts to address their essential questions and improve student performance. In both schools, district policy addressed shared commitment, within-school collaboration and/or reflective inquiry and helped them maintain high levels of school capacity over the course of our study.

In contrast, teachers from Pitlochry participated in district professional development related to SFA reading largely on an individual basis. While they had opportunities to collaborate with peers from other schools in Drummond, they did not develop strong norms for working with their colleagues at Pitlochry. Further, the district had few strategies for promoting collaboration or reflective inquiry among teachers from the same school. In sum, the levels of collaboration and inquiry, as well as overall capacity, at Pitlochry remained low throughout our study as the district did little to raise them.

Research suggests that other innovative professional development activities, while increasing the knowledge and skills of individual teachers, may fail to address within-school collaboration and reflective inquiry. The California Subject Matter Projects (CSMPSs), for example, provided opportunities for accomplished teachers to collaborate and engage in reflective inquiry with peers from other schools and to assume a variety of leadership roles (Pennell & Firestone, 1996; Medina & St. John, 1997). The impact of the CSMPs on organizational capacity in individual schools may have been small, though. By enabling

experienced teachers to collaborate and engage in inquiry with peers from other schools, the projects may have lead many of them to identify much more strongly with these practitioners than with colleagues at their own schools.

A second implication from this analysis is that districts are more likely to help schools strengthen or maintain high levels of professional community and program coherence when their policies are internally coherent and remain consistent over time. In Jackson, the consolidated plan requirements and district resource teachers were complementary. For those schools that focused on literacy in their plans, the district offered several activities that promoted a coherent approach including the ELC, the MCOS, and the summer institute. In Salomon, the district helped Renfrew maintain a high level of capacity by providing support for inquiry groups for many years as well as autonomy for schools to make decisions about professional development. Again, Drummond represents an interesting counter-example. While the district initially offered extensive support for SFA reading, it implemented new policies related to curriculum, assessment, and professional development over the course of our study that sent conflicting signals to schools. Pitlochry maintained a high level of commitment to SFA reading despite these policy shifts, but commitment to SFA math may have been weakened by two aspects of the district policy context: the lack of implementation checks in 1998-99 and Drummond's requirement that teachers participate in math workshops that were unrelated to SFA math.

Beyond our study, research on New York City's District 2 provides further evidence that district policy can help schools build capacity when it is internally coherent and remains consistent over time. District 2 promoted program coherence by focusing its professional development efforts on literacy for several years. The district's approach to literacy, known as the Balanced Literacy Program, remained in place for more than a decade. In the mid-1990s, district staff developed a series of guidelines for classroom instruction and professional development in literacy. These guidelines, consistent with the Balanced Literacy approach, emphasized the need for teachers to allocate specific amounts of time to guided reading, shard reading, independent reading, word study, read aloud, and writing (Stein & D'Amico, 1998).

District 2's use of consultants supported its focus on the Balanced Literacy Program. In contrast to other districts that employ consultants to provide brief workshops on a range of topics, District 2 had them work in a sustained way with teachers on the components of the Balanced Literacy approach. The consultants helped schools promote collaboration by "establish(ing) close working relationships with small groups of teachers" and meeting with them during common planning periods (Elmore & Burney, 1997, p.17).

The third major implication is that the extent to which districts support capacity depends upon the interaction between individual schools and their policy contexts. In particular, strong leadership from principals and others can help schools interact with their policy environments in ways that build capacity. Due to strong leadership, some schools were able to make use of supportive policies to strengthen capacity while buffering themselves from the effects of inconsistent and incoherent policy contexts. At Kintyre, teachers' participation in district-sponsored literacy activities, their work with the district resource teacher, and their focus on literacy in their consolidated plans helped the school address all aspects of capacity. Further, the principal's ability to protect the school from the potentially disruptive effects of Jackson's standards and assessments enabled Kintyre to maintain a strong commitment to Montessori and a fairly high level of program coherence.

Other schools, though, were unable to use potentially supportive policies to build capacity or to protect themselves from deleterious policy contexts. One district in our study, Crescent, offered workshops and trainings in emergent literacy as well as professional development related to state literacy and math assessments. Crescent also provided ten days of professional development, five of which were controlled by teachers and five of which were controlled by schools. Despite the district's focus on literacy and the large number of professional development days that were available, Falkirk Elementary School failed to use professional development to establish a shared schoolwide commitment to a particular approach to teaching literacy. Furthermore, the levels of collaboration, reflective inquiry, and program coherence at Falkirk were low compared to most other schools in our study.

Another district in our study, Brentwood, required teachers to implement a systemwide curriculum and participate in professional development related to Dimensions of Learning (DOL). We studied Carlisle Elementary, a school in Brentwood that was trying to implement Core Knowledge and help its teachers align their practices with the state assessments, the Maryland State Performance Assessment Program (MSPAP). While the DOL trainings supported teachers' efforts to align their practices with MSPAP, the combination of Core Knowledge, MSPAP, and the district curriculum resulted in a high degree of program fragmentation. At the time of our first visit to Carlisle (fall 1997), there was little shared commitment or program coherence because the principal had failed to buffer the school from the disruptive effects of these district requirements on school capacity.

A final implication from this analysis is that districts can help individual schools build capacity through either centralized or decentralized approaches to professional development and school improvement. Jackson's use of a more centralized approach to professional development and school improvement helped Kintyre maintain a fairly high level of capacity through the end of our study. On the other hand, the two schools with the highest levels of capacity throughout our study, Lewis and Renfrew, were in districts that had very decentralized approaches. The study did not address, however, whether centralized approaches to district policy were more likely than decentralized approaches to help many schools enhance capacity. Instead, these findings suggest a need for further research that examines the effects of district policy on large numbers of schools per district.

In order to help significant numbers of schools enhance capacity, districts may need to provide some instructional guidance through centralized policies while also promoting school-level autonomy. Researchers could usefully explore how districts respond to this dilemma by documenting the nature and configuration of district policies related to curriculum, assessment, professional development, and school improvement; and considering how various district policy environments influence capacity in large numbers of schools. More specifically, future studies might examine 1) how significant numbers of schools in individual districts interact with

particular configurations of district policy; and 2) what configurations of district policy are most likely to help many schools enhance or maintain high levels of capacity.

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